

# New Challenges for an Historic Problem

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The race problem that the Cuban leadership paradoxically proclaimed was resolved, and has for so long silenced, is now beginning to become a burden it is unable to ignore.

The totalitarian model's structural and irreversible crisis increasingly reveals and reconfirms the historic disadvantages that Cuba's African descendants have suffered. The authorities in Havana have attempted to mitigate these limitations through what has amounted to essentially self-serving rhetoric.

In the last few years, objective circumstances have complicated and also conferred an uncomfortable visibility to this delicate issue. What is immediately apparent is that plain, ordinary Cuban society is becoming aware of and disquieted by this problem in an unprecedented way. The fact that blacks and white citizens are becoming sensitive to the problem is indicative of a new socio-cultural perspective on the phenomenon. A solution to this problem is essential to the nation's future, to the integrity of its social fabric, and to its stability, if it is to reconstruct the essential elements necessary for the health of that social fabric. It is bad news for the leadership that common Cubans are beginning to shake off their colonial trappings and paralyzing

silence, to take a good look at, consider, and talk about the race problem.

The resurgence of independent institutions is another significant element. With their high intellectual level and ability to create social cohesion, they are beginning to weigh in on the problem, to contribute to re-establishing an open debate on the matter, and offer citizens the tools they need—knowledge, self-esteem, and awareness of how to engage in civic discussion—to be able to confront this complex issue.

Initiatives such as the Hall of Illustrious Black Men and Women in Cuba, through which the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* acknowledges and pays homage to those African descendants who are relevant to our history—with no regard for when they lived, what ideology they espoused—provide a new dimension to this struggle in Cuba. This is something the Cuban government has been incapable of doing, given its very nature. The holding of the first Race and Identity Forum: Cuba-Past, Present, and Future (October 2010) showed that we anti-racist fighters in Cuba are perfectly capable of giving the subject all the rigorously intellectual attention it deserves, without letting it become a forum for political confrontational. For their own

part, the activities of the *Citizens' Observatory against Discrimination* imply that Cubans have stopped being unflinching victims, and that the authorities are no longer able to openly violate peoples' most basic human rights.

Uptil now, Cuba had kept itself far from a growing continental and worldwide movement that is promoting in any way possible the rescue and recognition of the legacy and rights of African descendants. Currently, though, there are many international observers and others interested in the topic who have an objective and critical view of Cuba. Many anti-racist activists from North and South America, who for so long have accepted the Cuban Revolution as paradigmatic, are now expressing concern for Cuba's complex reality, and solidarity with the island's anti-racists.

The solidity and strength of Cuba's independent, anti-racist movements, and the international attention that the country's reality is garnering, have generated discomfort for the Cuban authorities. They have set loose their repressive forces, to quell the peaceful actions of these independent movements. They are forcefully trying to prevent their activities from taking place, and frequently deny these activists entry into official, sanctioned spaces where the intellectual aspects of this subject are discussed. Lately, the Cuban authorities have exerted tremendous pressure on a number of distinguished intellectuals who are close to officialdom's inner circle.

Their purpose is to sow division or discord among those interested in the race issue, and mitigate the impact of critical views of the problem.

By now, efforts to maintain the traditional silence and manipulation there has been concerning race problems are less and less effective. But, a lack of responsible conviction has led to the adoption of a number of inconsistent and inconsequential positions that

do not in any way promote the objective and serious treatment the issue deserves. The fact is that due to its magnitude and pervasiveness, we must first recognize its existence, in order to face the problem. In facing a race problem of this magnitude, those who have all the power in their hands cannot possibly sustain the practice of employing a shifting, official rhetoric.

At one time or another, our maximum leaders—Fidel and Raúl Castro—have acknowledged the severity of the problem, even considering our backwardness and lack of progress on this issue embarrassing. Naturally, they have done so without admitting any particular, personal blame. Thus, while police authorities flatly deny the existence of this problem in Cuba, some official spokespersons make assurances that Cuba has fought the battle against racism on African soil, through the promotion of folkloric music and dance groups, and also through the awarding of scholarships for African and Caribbean students to study in Cuba. Some authorized academics admit there have been some delays in this process because it has been the elites who have controlled knowledge throughout our entire history, or because the problem has inspired only meager treatment in the media or education.

Twelve years after not having participated in the United Nations' Committee Against Racial Discrimination (CERD), the content of the report presented by the Cuban Vice-Minister of Foreign Relations assured those who heard it that there are only a few remaining prejudices in Cuba, the result of centuries of colonialism, that they "are not particularly significant, and that they are expressed mostly in the sphere of personal relations, most frequently amongst couples."

Anyone with only a passing knowledge of Cuban history and reality knows that the one area of social life in Cuba that is least

plagued by racism is that of interpersonal and partner relations. Cuba is the product of miscegenation, of the repeated amorous or carnal coupling of blacks and whites. The interracial relations that have characterized Cuban society since its inception have often unmasked or distorted the true, cultural and structural anomalies that have prevented the realization of an extremely desired equality between the different component groups in Cuba. It seems that the functionaries and experts at the Ministry of Foreign Relations (MINREX)—almost all of the white, to boot—have a very low opinion of the CERD's experts' intelligence, and consider that the Castro brothers have taken to saying foolish and unsubstantiated things about this serious problem.

In the first place, the clarity and weight of the substance of *Reasons for Concern and Recommendations*, which is contained in the CERD's *Final Observation* on its analysis of the Cuban case, reveal that foreign observers and specialists are no longer unaware of the country's social reality. It also shows well just how out of tune with the dynamics of the global scene the Cuban leaders are relative to an issue as complex as racism.

This report's recommendations concerning the creation of independent entities for the treatment of the problem, the ratification of the U.N. pacts that promote respect for all human rights: the adjustment of laws to these universally assumed values, the structural, educational, and media changes that must occur: and the already established connection between the CERD and independent, anti-racist movements in Cuba, place the Cuban authorities in a very compromised position, particularly as it concerns their next report to this entity.

What's interesting about this case is that the U.N. experts (who were not as naïve or uninformed as the MINREX strategists assumed they'd be), who did not have direct contact

with Cuba's reality, are unfamiliar with the fact that officialdom's actions in dealing with this problem are carried out by nothing more than phantasmagoric and inoperative groups with no true tie to society's real heartbeat, remain quite defensive about the intellectual concerns and doubts that interracial relationships generate. CERD experts cannot seem to imagine that Cuban citizens—who are victims of the government's very instrumental and effective silence—are completely unaware of the U.N.'s workings, its commitment to Cuba, and just how much this problem was discussed at the aforementioned CERD session.

On March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011, exactly one year after the U.N. declared 2011 the International Year of African Descendants, the island's cultural authorities presented the action items on their list in connection with this global agenda. Beyond the slow response of official-type institutions in confronting certain important issues (the CIR's 2011 Agenda was presented on last December 29<sup>th</sup>, while its members were being victimized by the political police's repressive actions), or having what was proposed there fall on deaf ears—as is often the case—what is powerfully noteworthy is that we have now heard two, new and contradictory forms of official rhetoric.

Two of the functionaries who were responsible for this presentation assured us that “due to history, sensibility, and culture, to be Cuban is to be a child of Africa.” Of course, this was nothing more than an opportunistic statement offered up after a long history of denying the value of African heritage for our culture and national being. In doing this, they conveniently shoved back into the closet all other foundational elements of Cuba's nationality. Yet, that was not enough. They also totally ignored, and sank in the mire, a glaringly undeniable truth, by repeating—one again—what the leadership has always proclaimed, the ‘fact’ that “the first and greatest

affirmative action that restored dignity to the descendant of African slaves—*en masse*—was the peoples' victory in January 1959.”

It would seem that the elite's racism is visceral and arterial, so much so that it is incapable of getting beyond that old strategy of trying to divide and confront black intellectuals, repressing those who do not submit, and persisting in offering up official speeches so devoid of realism and intellectual integrity, they are generally contradictory and even sometimes ridiculous. Due to current interests, or a desire to politically survive, the top leadership has often shifted its position or design concerning principled issues, e.g., the Cuban community abroad, the circulation of remittances, the tourist industry, foreign investment, religious tolerance, and non-governmental economic incentives known as *cuentapropismo* (self-employment). Despite this, neither the evident and dangerous complexity of the race problem or the increasing doubt that is being expressed by members of all levels of society seem to be inspiring sensitivity and responsibility amongst Cuban authorities.

For example, in recent years, the educational system has fallen victim to multiple transformations and innovations, many of them unsuccessful. Yet, human rights, the rights of citizens, and the race problem have never found a place in the curriculum. As a society, we have a long road before us if we are to face our accumulated fissures and shortcomings. The International Year of African Descendants, the mechanisms promoted by the U.N., and the subsequent proposals of independent civic movements are opportunities the Cuban government should not miss, so it can catch up with its society's times and needs.

So that the problem can be properly aired, the Cuban authorities should go from simply acknowledging the problem's survival to taking responsibility for its persistence. It should

be promoting a true rescue and valorization of our history—a version free of omissions or distortions—and include in our nation's curriculum information about the history of true facts, figures, and processes that have heretofore, so often been made invisible. Likewise, it should promote a fair valorization of the cultural heritage of Africans and their descendant, and an open, intellectual, academic, social and cultural debate about the issue everywhere, at all levels, so that citizens can participate and contribute without fear of reprisal or untoward attention. Furthermore, it should promote a balanced representation of black people in the media, and in symbolic, commercial and corporate images. Rather than repressing them, it should acknowledge and collaborate with independent entities to help establish true racial integration and, above all, provide material support to African descendants so that they can participate in our society's new socio-economic dynamism in a dignified manner.

These are some of the first and definitive, sensible and responsible steps that could be taken, but Cuba's leaders have shown themselves to be unwilling to take them. As such, they are in danger of getting too behind in their treatment of a problem that is the center of attention for many other societies, governments, international organizations, and even for large corporations all around the world. In facing this complex and pervasive problem, the Cuban government should begin to abandon its indolence and lack of action, and become aware of the fact that silence and manipulation are getting to be *passé*, because the rest of the world—in its sensitivity and solidarity—is watching, and the humblest of Cubans, who have so often been fooled or betrayed, are beginning to feel the awakening and liberating spirit of self-esteem.